

Elastic Cultural Activism

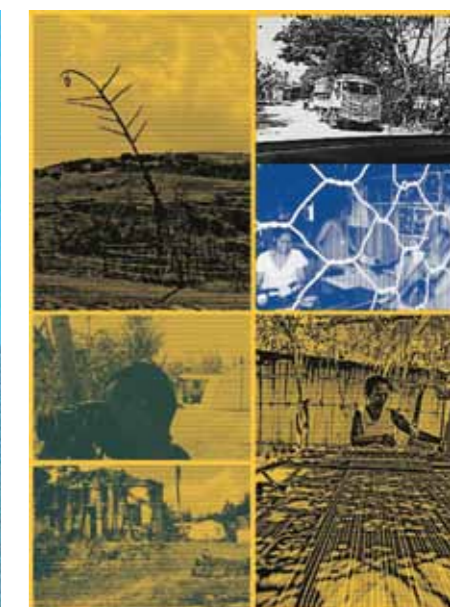
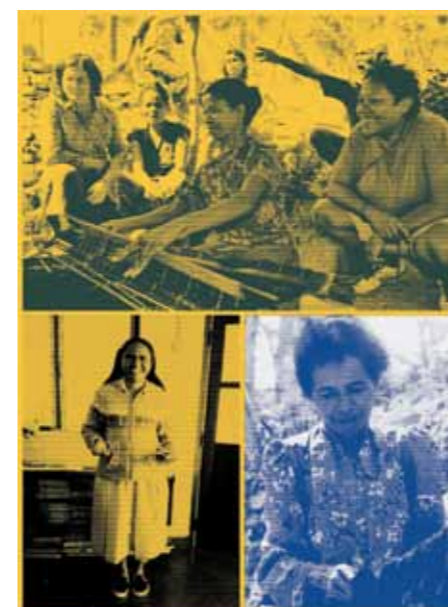
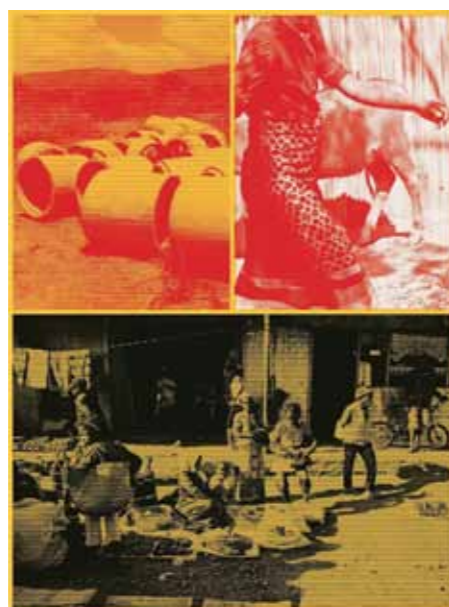
by Jo Holder, curator,
The Cross Art Projects,
Kings Cross

In late 2012, four artists, Maria Madeira and Victor De Sousa from Timor, Narelle Jubelin and Fiona MacDonald from Australia, travelled to eleven of the thirteen districts of Timor Leste to witness its reconstruction from scorched earth and to consider connections between women's woven textiles (known as *tais*) and the contemporary art world. While each artist's practice was diverse, ranging over documentary, painting, printmaking, weaving and petit point and installation, the artists shared an interest in processes that engage art, archives and communities to counter the erasure of memory.

This independent project began with an ongoing conversation about Timor Leste's cultural renewal between curator Jennifer Phipps (1944 – 2014) and Narelle Jubelin.¹ While it is imperative to maintain initiatives such as the Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory's fine collection of South East Asian and Timorese textiles, they also hoped to generate sustainable cross-cultural initiatives for Timorese artists.

The outcome of the field research is a compilation called *Elastics / Borracha / Elástico*, that spans a set of prints, exhibitions and events in Darwin and Sydney, and a catalogue and bibliography to be launched in Dili later this year.² *Elastics* shows the more subversive face of traditions that gave spirit and form to Timor Leste's four-decade struggle that followed Portugal's de-colonisation of Timor Leste and the Indonesian invasion in 1975.

The *Elastics* archive (10 prints; photographic images on Creative Commons and video artworks by De Sousa and MacDonald) is a unique record of everyday moments in the transition of the world's poorest country to a new democracy. The prints salute the role that travelling print exhibitions (sometimes known as resistance art) have played in third world democracy struggles in keeping



people informed – especially in South Africa and Latin America. In this popular tradition, artists design eye-catching prints to be pinned in a local centre or marketplace that are intelligible to differing languages and cultures.

In Dili to remember the abuse, torture and killing of thousands of Timorese activists within its walls, the Balide Comarca (prison), run by the Indonesian military between 1975 and 1999, was rehabilitated as a heritage site or 'sacred building', to mark the transformation from trauma to peace. The Commission for Reception, Truth and Reconciliation (Comissão de Acolhimento, Verdade e Reconciliação or CAVR; active 2001 – 2005) sat in the prison.³ As well as CAVR archives the site includes a library, exhibition and meeting spaces. Maria Madeira and Victor De Sousa aided this reconciliation process: Maria working as a translator for CAVR and Victor painting murals on the prison walls. Posters that set out the decolonisation story, *Istoria Timor-Leste Husi* (designer David Palazon, 2008) introduce the exhibition. The CAVR concept of 'living memory' inspired the realisation of *Elastics*.

The title of *Elastics*, based on the children's jumping game, refers in English, Tetum and Portuguese to the zigzag and weave of historic records and testimony according to geo-political point of view or generational experience. Many truths have been told; many will remain untold. The archives and their stories are for future generations.

The group's exhaustive process of selecting photographs and videos took many months of web file sharing before they created the final 'weave': a story that records each province visited and each weaver's name and details. The high-key colour suggests the vivid colour of *tais* in a dusty landscape and the 1970s pop art heyday of offset lithographic printmaking that suits the Big Fag Press in Sydney where the artists worked with the Big Fag artists to print the editions for the project.

The prints show weavers at a backstrap loom working in the heart of their community. For thousands of years these textiles, that vary by district and village, have been integral to social, spiritual, and economic life. Heirloom *tais* can take years to make; others are made for everyday wear or to trade. Each *tais* is re-felt and re-imagined by the weaver with stories and struggles sometimes embedded.

The frontispiece of the print set is a quote by weaver Albertina da Cruz of Atuabe:

'Even though they look very similar, we do know which *tais* we made, it is like our own hand. We can see the "place of our hand" it is like our own fingerprint. Each of us know exactly the place where our hands have touched.'

For supporters around the world the small hand-woven *tais* traded at Free Timor Leste fundraisers, presented to bigwigs, or pictured

in hand-printed in campaign ephemera, were our introduction to Timorese culture. Now preserved in top drawers, sewing boxes or folders, this material is evidence of the wider collaboration that quietly sits alongside the bigger historical narrative.

The Darwin exhibition drew on the archives of a unique group of Australian and Timorese refugee activists, artists and performers from the now defunct Darwin-based Australians For A Free East Timor (AFFET; active 1991 – 2003). In 1995 they created *Tuba Rai Metin: firmly gripping the earth*, an installation of a Timorese sacred culture house (*uma lulik*) for the Darwin Fringe Festival after it was rejected by the Darwin Museum and Art Gallery. It was installed/squatted in a government precinct called Federal Square adjacent to our Darwin venue, the Chan Contemporary Art Space. AFFET member and master weaver Veronica

Pereira Maia generously lent to the Darwin *Elastics* exhibition her stunning *Tais Don*, a 5-piece a memorial of the names of those killed in the 1991 Santa Cruz Massacre in Dili, woven beside the *uma lulik* over the duration of *Tuba Rai Metin*.

In the prints, two small images of oil wells appear as pointers to the contest over oil and gas resources in the Timor Sea between the disproportionately resourced nations Australia and Timor Leste. While *Elastics / Borracha / Elástico* was being exhibited in October – November 2014, the new Timor Gap accords between Australia and Timor Leste were being tested for their equity and fairness. To date this has not succeeded. As part of the Darwin exhibition, expert speakers outlined the tiny nation's life-and-death economic stake in the outcome.

By respecting these art traditions, the *Elastics* collective honours the resistance and quietly revives the term activism, crucially, as part of a new wave of artists across Southeast Asia resolving the division between activism and aesthetic practice.⁴ Far from established art-world circuits the *Elastics* print set and its components speak to a public who shares and understands a distinct and identifiable cross-cultural history and has, of necessity, created a hybrid form of cultural activism.

The prints will be strategically gifted to Timor as part of a national/local project of sister-city relationships between Timor Leste and Australia, including between Dili and Darwin councils, initiated by resistance leader Jose Xanana Gusmão in 2006 – 2007 when serving as the first President of East Timor. It is hoped the prints can tour from Dili to the weaving districts. The Northern Centre for Contemporary Art now has an ongoing Dili to Darwin platform to continue earlier commissions by Darwin Festival and Timor Leste's inaugural arts festival Arte Publiku. •

References

1. Timor Leste won independence in 2002 and has very limited arts funding through aid organisations. Melbourne independent curator Jennifer Phipps had initiated and funded other small regional projects and generously paid for Narelle Jubelin to visit the country on an open brief. In turn Narelle Jubelin initiated a mobile residency and invited the collaboration of her colleagues. The print set and catalogue adds to work by groups such as the Aloa Foundation, a fair trade handicrafts movement set up by Kirsty Sword-Gusmão with village weaving groups and overseas agencies such as AusAID, UNESCO and Timor Aid. Melbourne based Timor Aid works to maintain the integrity of Timor Leste textile traditions and assisted the artists in Dili. The country's first community organised arts festival Arte Publiku was held from 24 – 31 August 2014.
2. *Elastics / Borracha / Elástico*, curated by Jo Holder and the artists. Exhibitions: *Elastics / Borracha Mobile Residency: Darwin<->Dili*, Chan Contemporary Art Space, Darwin, 17 September – 12 October 2014, presented by The Northern Centre for Contemporary Art and including participatory works and a symposium; *Elastics / Borracha Mobile Residency: Darwin<->Sydney<->Dili*, The Cross Art Projects, Sydney, 27 September – 18 October 2014. The Darwin focus was on the local history of activism, from AFFET to Timor Treaty justice while Sydney looked at documentary film. A catalogue and bibliography will be launched in Dili in 2015 at Sentru Kultural Xanana, Dili and Biblioteca Por Timor, Lisbon.
3. The exhibition is called *Chega!*, meaning 'stop!' or 'enough!' and the poster exhibition is available on www.cavr.timorleste.org.
4. The folio is inspired by the daring anti-totalitarian and resistance printmaking traditions of Southeast Asia which incorporate the dramatic line prints of Taring Padi and the Gembel Art Collective and the brief Culture Kitchen as well as Australia's silk-screen pioneers and artist-activator printmakers.

Fiona MacDonald, Maria Madeira,
Narelle Jubelin, Victor De Sousa,
Elastic / Borracha / Elástico

(2012 Timor Leste Mobile Residency Archive), 2014,
offset lithographic, set of 10 prints,
62.5 x 56.7 cm (installed), 62.5 x 46.5 cm (print size). Ed: 30.
Printed by the artists with Big Fag Press, Sydney.

View exhibition documentation at:
[crossart.com.au/home/index.php/
archive/261-elastics-borracha-elastico-
dili-darwin-sydney-dili-lisboa](http://crossart.com.au/home/index.php/archive/261-elastics-borracha-elastico-dili-darwin-sydney-dili-lisboa)